



Commentary

Policy and community-led action on sustainability and climate change: Paradox and possibility in the interstices

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ABSTRACT

This commentary relates findings reported in this collection to personal and collective experiences within ECOLISE, a unique experiment in creating a common platform for networking, collaboration, learning and policy influence representing multiple national and international networks of CBIs. The establishment of ECOLISE has raised numerous challenges identical or parallel to those faced by CBIs and reported elsewhere in this collection: risks of co-optation by established policy actors, the need to develop new operational processes in multiple areas simultaneously and without direct precedents on which to build, and the paradoxical position of operating within the very same structures it seeks to change. These issues have a common source in tensions between conventional forms of social process and collaborative cultures and those emerging from community-led action and prefiguring the social goals of CBIs. Lessons from experiences within ECOLISE can thus complement and further illuminate findings from research on and with CBIs.

This commentary discusses findings reported in this collection in the light of personal and collective experiences within the European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE), a meta-network of community-based initiatives (CBIs) across Europe, in which both authors are centrally involved. Over the same timescale as the research on which papers in this special issue are based, ECOLISE has begun a unique experiment in creating a common platform for networking, collaboration, learning and policy influence representing multiple national and international networks of CBIs. This has raised numerous challenges identical or parallel to those faced by CBIs and reported elsewhere in this collection: risks of co-optation by established policy actors, the need to develop new operational processes in multiple areas simultaneously and without direct precedents on which to build, and the paradoxical position of operating within the very same structures it seeks to change. These issues have a common source in tensions between the new forms of social process and collaborative cultures emerging from community-led action and prefiguring the social goals of CBIs on the one hand, and on the other hand the social and cultural legacy of the world they are seeking to complement or even replace. Navigating complex governance challenges arising from such tensions is a key emerging skill set, both personal and organisational, within CBIs and their networks at local, regional, national and international levels. The case studies presented in this collection illustrate various ways in which CBIs encounter these challenges and devise strategies for addressing them.

Celata and Coletti focus on urban gardening as both concrete practice and metaphor for self-organised, ecologically aware action. Both are highly relevant to ECOLISE. Growers and agroecological interests are prominent in its networks. Its internal procedures, derived from established practices in key member networks in permaculture, ecovillages and Transition and influenced by the

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permaculture principle ‘everything gardens’, are decentralised, dynamic and constantly evolving. ECOLISE also experiences a political ambivalence similar to that expressed by many initiatives in the urban gardening study. It consists of and represents networks and initiatives so radical that many casual observers mistakenly see them as apolitical, and seeks to engage on their behalf with, and influence, policy. Reconciliation of this paradox requires novel processes for internal governance and operations (often adapting or upscaling innovations developed by member networks and initiatives) and collaboration with subtly transgressive, or at least flexible, allies on the margins of incumbent regimes.

Celata and Coletti note the risk of CBIs becoming instrumentalised as a means for governments to deliver – and take credit for – centralised policy goals, or to mitigate or obscure the effects of insufficient and/or inappropriate action on sustainability and climate issues. This danger is perhaps more pronounced at the scale at which ECOLISE operates and amplified by its explicit attention to policy-related goals, which perhaps lend themselves to co-optation by political actors. Governments are naturally unlikely to support CBIs, or their representative networks, unless this helps advance policy goals. However, governments tend to be reluctant to embrace the radical policy reform necessary for genuine progress towards sustainability, and in particular to question the structural and inherently unsustainable reliance of macro-economic stability on economic growth (Jackson, 2009; Ward et al., 2016). Under such circumstances, political support for CBIs – if indeed it goes beyond rhetoric at all – may amount to no more than cosmetic mitigation of deficiencies in other aspects of climate and sustainability policy.

On the other hand, creative engagement with policy may enable CBIs to act as ‘Trojan Horses’ (Leach et al., 2010) bringing previously marginal ideas into the realms of political possibility. Stabilising the system is an important role of incumbent regimes, and so some resistance to even positive change is therefore likely. If CBIs and their representative organizations can leverage the consequent gaps between political rhetoric and action, they may become an ‘empowered niche’ (Haxeltine et al., 2008), able to make visible these hidden possibilities and in doing so create opportunities for transformative action.

This form of policy engagement, simultaneously disruptive and conciliatory, may minimise risks of outright co-optation. However, it raises dangers of coming to favour certain types of community-led action over others, undermining the autonomy of local initiatives or national networks. Håkansson describes how community-led sustainability action in a neighbourhood of South London privileges certain local narratives concerning place-making. Similarly, a coordinating or representative network that responded to regime-level pressures by adopting a culture of discipline or conformity could shape the landscape of community-led action in ways that constrain or at least bias possibilities for local action.

Becker et al describe the phenomenon of *coercive isomorphism*, where incumbents at both local and national levels create pressure upon CBIs to conform to the requirements and expectations of the regimes of which they are a part. Their study of Berlin-based CBIs shows how adopting and maintaining a legal structure can constrain the ways CBIs develop. Coercive isomorphism of this type can derive from resource dependency (i.e., dependency upon the expertise necessary to create and sustain a legal structure), access to finance, or wishes to collaborate with regime actors. ECOLISE has experienced and been shaped by pressures towards coercive isomorphism of all three types, creating ongoing tensions between values and capability. The need to negotiate these tensions is a significant driver of critical self-reflection and innovative action; this seems likely to remain a permanent, or at least ongoing, state of affairs. Through ECOLISE and other networks, learning about how to cope with pressures towards coercive isomorphism can permeate outwards, be transformed through its application in diverse local and other contexts, feed back in at network level and from there to other local initiatives. Networks and meta-networks of CBIs thus enact a form of multi-level learning ecology (Henfrey, 2017) both responsive to and disruptive of their wider context.

Finance is the main focus of the paper by Dinnie & Holstead, who draw attention to the procedural and operational constraints that can arise when CBIs seeking to acquire funding are consequently obliged to conform to the requirements of grant-giving organisations. A key challenge for CBIs and associated organizations is generating sufficient financial capacity to achieve their aims while avoiding being shaped or directed by the nature of funding programmes or requirements of funders. Strategies that we have experienced include a broadening of perspective beyond funding to ‘resource mobilisation’ (taking account of intangible and existing non-monetary resources); creation of niches within high budget projects led by larger organizations to support smaller-scale activities relevant to the project’s wider aims but difficult to fund independently; alliance with organisations with existing capacity to secure and manage large grants willing to create such niches within their projects; caution about the prospects of applying for public grants or other highly bureaucratised funding programmes and preference, instead, for building relationships with like-minded funders, often over extended periods, to explore common interests and co-create a shared vision as a basis for a financial award; and, based on the permaculture principle of ‘stacking’, building into funding applications and other fundraising activities direct beneficial outcomes – for example in relationship to networking, relationship-building, creation of ideas and/or organisational development – and proceeding only if these indirect benefits justify the effort even if funding is not secured.

The prominence of Knowledge and Learning in the ECOLISE strategy and organisational structure means that research grants are a possible funding stream. A recent position paper by a coalition of Civil Society Organisations calls for the next round of Framework Programme funding to prioritise projects that reflect core values of peace, democracy, social justice, solidarity and sustainability, and to move beyond spurious economic metrics of success, using the three pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals (social, economic, environmental) as a guiding framework (Global Health Advocates, 2017). This resonates strongly with ECOLISE’s aspirations to move beyond the limitations of current policy development and implementation via new processes through which researchers, practitioners and policy makers come together in collaborative, inclusive and democratic processes of collective action learning towards improved approaches to practical action and co-creation of the policy and research regimes that can support these. Enacting this vision provides a potential path forward in CBI research, building upon the important insights in the papers in this collection and other research in this growing field.

Many papers in this collection demonstrate the importance to CBIs of creating and enacting collective visions of place. At network

and movement level, ‘place’ can consist of a multitude of such sites of local action, constituted through various virtual and/or transient spaces where geographically dispersed communities of practice communicate and collaborate. Such spaces have crucial roles in ensuring that action in support of CBLs at higher scales remains connected with its essential nature, at a convergence of these multiple instances of concrete rootedness in physical space.

Regular reconnection with the constantly innovative, open-ended processes of becoming that make up the essence of community-based action allows the heart of organizations operating at strategic levels to remain true to this nature, in spite of the compromises often necessary for the pragmatic purpose of building bridges with incumbents rooted in more conventional values and perspectives. As an example, the ECOLISE Knowledge and Learning Working Group has a research culture that emphasises participatory, action-led methodologies and the consequent direction by practical action of research, policy and communication efforts. This is a potential transformative ingredient in research processes (e.g. see [Fazey et al., 2018](#)), which might in this way themselves become part of a wider paradigm shift ([Göpel, 2017](#)) whose seeds are sprouting in communities throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

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